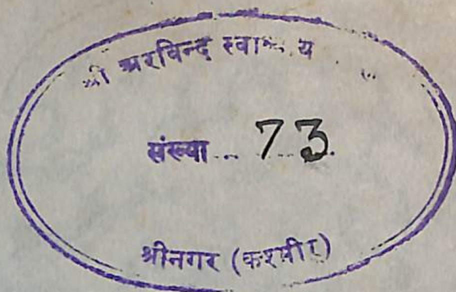


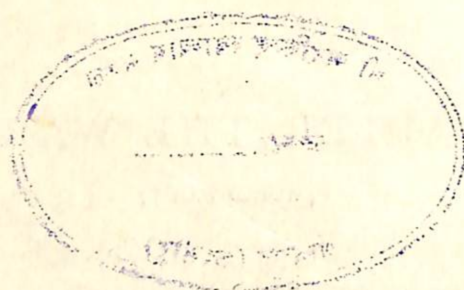


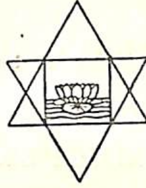
SRI AUROBINDO

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(WORLD WAR I)





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After The War

THE great war has for some time been over: it is already receding into the near distances of the past. Around us is a black mist and welter of the present, before us the face of a dim and ambiguous future. It is just possible, however, to take some stock of the immediate results of the war, although by no stretch of language can the world situation be called clear, for it is marked rather by chaotic drift and an unexampled confusion. The ideals which were so loud of mouth during the collision—mainly as advertising agents of its conflicting interests,—are now discredited and silent: an uneasy locked struggle of irreconcilable forces entangled in an inextricable clasp of enmity, but too weak or too exhausted to prevail against each other and unable to separate, a bewildered opportunism incapable of guiding itself or finding an issue is the character of the present situation. Humanity has the figure of a derelict with broken mast and rudder drifting on a sea still upheaved by the after swell of the tempest, the statesmen of the Supreme Council figuring as its impotent captains and shouting directions that have not the least chance of useful execution and have to be changed from moment to moment. Nowhere is there a guiding illumination or a just idea that is at all practicable. A great intellectual and moral bakruptcy, an immense emptiness and depression has succeeded to the delirium of massacre.

This is indeed the most striking immediate after result of the war, the atmosphere of a worldwide disappointment and disillusionment and the failure of great hopes and ideals. What high and large and dazzling things were promised us during the war, and where are they now? Rejected, tarnished, dishonoured they lie cast aside dead and stripped and desecrated on the blood-stained refuse heap that the war has left behind it. Not one remains to us. The war that was fought to end war has been only the parent of fresh armed conflict and civil discord and it is the exhaustion that followed it which alone prevents as yet another vast and sanguinary struggle. The new fair and peaceful world order that was promised us has gone far away into the land of the chimeras. The League of Nations that was to have embodied it hardly even exists or exists only as a mockery and a byeword. It is an ornamental, a quite helpless and otiose appendage to the Supreme

Council, at present only a lank promise dangled before the vague and futile idealism of those who are still faithful to its sterile formula, a League on paper and with little chance, even if it becomes more apparently active, of being anything more than a transparent cover or a passive support for the domination of the earth by a close oligarchy of powerful governments or, it may be even, of two allied and imperialistic nations. The principle of self-determination once so loudly asserted is now openly denied and summarily put aside by the victorious empires. In its place we have the map of Europe remade on old diplomatic principles, Africa appropriated and partitioned as the personal property of two or three great European powers and western Asia condemned to be administered under a system of mandates that are now quite openly justified as instruments of commercial exploitation and have to be forced on unwilling peoples by the sovereign right of the machine-gun and the bayonet. The spectacle of subject peoples and "protected" nations demanding freedom and held down by military force continues to be a principal feature of the new order. The promised death of militarism is as far off as ever: its spirit and its actuality survive everywhere, and only its centre of strength and main operation has shifted westward—and eastward. All these things were foreseen while yet the war continued by a few who even while holding to the ideal persisted in seeing clearly: they are now popular commonplaces.

This however is only one side of the situation, the most present, insistent and obvious, but not therefore the most important and significant. It marks a stage, it is not the definite result of the great upheaval. The expectation of an immediate and magically complete transformation and regeneration of the world by the radical operation of the war was itself an error. It was an error to imagine that the power of the past rooted in the soil of long-seated human custom and character would disappear in one fierce moment or abdicate at once to the virgin power of the future. The task to be accomplished is too great to be so easy: the regeneration of man and his life, his rebirth into a higher nature is not to be effected by so summary and outward a process. It was an error to suppose that the war was or could be the painful, the terrible, but in the end the salutary crisis by which that great change would be decisively effected,—a change that would mean a complete renovation and purification of the soul, mind and life of humanity. The war came only as a first shock and overturn, an opportunity for certain clearances, a death-blow to the moral though not as yet to the material hold of certain ideas and powers that were till then confident and throned, sure of the present and hopeful of their possession of the future. It has loosened the soil, but the uprooting of all the old growths was more than it could effectuate. It has cleared a certain amount of ground, but the fruitful filling of that gound is an operation for

other forces: it has ploughed and upturned much soil, but it is as yet a far cry to the new sowing and the harvest. It was, finally, and it still continues a cherished error to imagine that the mere alteration, however considerable, of political or other machinery is the sufficient panacea for the shortcomings of civilisation. It is a change of spirit, therefore a spiritual change, that can alone be the sanction and the foundation of a greater and better human existence.

The survival of old principles and conditions is still not the important matter. However great their appearance of outward and material strength, inwardly they are sick, weakened and have forfeited the promise of the future: all their intellectual and moral hold is gone and with that disappearance there is evident a notable failing of their practical effectuating wisdom and of their sustaining self-confidence. The instinct of self-continuation, the impetus of their past motion keeps them going, and they must last so long as they have some hold in the inert continuity of the past mental and vital habit of the peoples and are not pushed over by the growing and arising strength of the new forces that belong to the future. All their movements only serve to increase that strength, and whether they seek to perpetuate themselves by a violent insistence on their own principle or haggle and compromise with the quite opposite principles that are destined to replace them, each step they take brings them nearer to their ending. It is more fruitful to regard rather the new things that are not yet in possession of the present but already struggling to assert themselves against its ponderous and effective but ephemeral pressure.

It was very evident during the progress of the war that there were two great questions that it would not solve but rather must prepare for an acute stage of crisis, the growing struggle between Capital and Labour and the Asiatic question, no longer a quarrel now between rival exploiters but the issue between invading Europe and a resurgent Asia. The war itself was in its immediate aspect a battle between the German idea and the middle-class liberalism represented by the western peoples, France, England, America, and during the settlement of that present issue the other two questions more momentous for the future had to be held in abeyance. There was a truce between Capital and Labour, a truce determined only by a violent concentration of national feeling that proved too strong for the vague idealistic internationalism of the orthodox socialistic idea, not by any essential issue; for the futile idyllic promise of a rapprochement and a reconciliation between the hostile classes was too hollow an unreality to count as a factor. At the same time the Asiatic question too was in suspension and even enticing prospects of self-determination and independence or more qualified but still tempting allurements were proffered by the liberal empires to peoples who had been till then held as beyond the pale of civilisation. The Asiatic

peoples too weak for an independent action ranged themselves on the side whose success seemed to offer to them the greater hope or else the least formidable menace. All this is now of the past: the natural and inevitable relations have reasserted themselves and these great questions are coming to a head. The modern contest between Capital and Labour has entered into a new phase and the two incurably antagonistic principles are evidently moving in spite of many hesitations and indecisions towards the final and decisive battle. In Asia the issue has already been joined between the old rule of dependency and protectorate with their new parti-coloured variation the mandate and the clear claim of the Asiatic peoples to equality and independence. All other things still in the forefront belong to the prolongation of the surviving or else to the liquidation of the dead past: these two alone are living questions of the immediate future.

The forces of Socialism and Capitalism now look each other in the face all over Europe,—all other distinctions are fading, the old minor political quarrels within the nation grow meaningless,—but have not yet joined battle. The old middle class regime still holds the material power, keeps by the prestige of possession and men's habit of preferring present ills to an insecure adventure the mind of the uncertain mass and summons all its remaining forces to maintain its position. It is faced by the first actuality of a successful socialistic and revolutionary regime in Russia, but hitherto, although its repeated efforts to stifle it in its birth have been in vain, it has succeeded in isolating, in blockading and half starving it, in erecting against its westward urge an artificial frontier and in stemming the more rapid propagation of its master ideas by a constant campaign of discredit. Attempts at any soviet revolution west of the Russian line have been put an end to for the moment by legal or military repression. On the other hand, the economic condition of the world becomes worse and not better every year and it is becoming more and more evident that Capitalism has not only lost its moral credit but that it is unable to solve the material problems it has itself raised and brought to a head, while it blocks the way to any other solution. Every year that passes in this deadlock sees an enormous increase in the strength of the socialistic idea and the number and quality and the extremist fervour of its adherents. There is undoubtedly almost everywhere a temporary stiffening and concentration of the old regime; this as a phenomenon very much resembles the similar stiffening and concentration of the old monarchic and aristocratic regime that was the first result of the war between revolutionary France and Europe: but it has less reality of force and little chance of an equal duration; for the current of revolution is now only checked and not as then temporarily fatigued and exhausted and the accumulated rush of the ideas and forces that make for change is in our day immeasurably greater. The materials of an immense political, social and eco-

nomic overturn, perhaps of a series of formidable explosions strengthened in force by each check and compression, everywhere visibly accumulate.

The outstanding portent of things to come is the continued existence, success, unbroken progress of the Russian revolution. This event promises to be as significant in human history as the great overturn of established ideas and institutions initiated in France in the eighteenth century, and to posterity it may well be this and not the downfall of Germany for which the great war will be ever memorable. Its importance is quite independent of the merits and demerits or the chances of survival of the present Bolshevik regime. The Bolshevik dictatorship is admittedly only an instrument of transition, a temporary concentration of revolutionary force, just as the Supreme Council and all that it supports is a temporary concentration of the opposing conservative forces. The achievements of this extraordinary government have been of a sufficiently astonishing character. Assailed continually from within and without, ruthlessly blockaded and starved and deprived of all means of sustenance and action except those it could create for itself out of itself or else conquer, repeatedly brought to the verge of downfall, it has survived all difficulties and dangers and rather derived always new strength from misfortune, overcome its internal and withstood its external enemies, spread itself in Asia beyond its own borders, organised out of chaos a strong civil and military instrument, and has had the force in the midst of scarcity, civil strife and foreign menace to lay the initial basis of a new type of society. This miracle of human energy is in itself no more than that, a repetition under more unfavourable circumstances of the extraordinary achievement of the Jacobins during the French Revolution. More important is the power of the idea that is behind these successes and has made them possible. It is a fact of only outward significance that the Bolsheviks not so long ago threatened with the loss of Moscow are now on the road to Warsaw. It is of much more significance that the western Powers find themselves driven at last to negotiate with the first successful communist government of modern times still denounced by them as a monstrosity to be destroyed and a danger to civilisation. But the thing of real significance is not these events that might have gone and might still go otherwise and might turn out to be only an episode; it is rather this fundamental fact affecting future possibilities that a great nation marked out as one of the coming leaders of humanity has taken a bold leap into the hidden gulfs of the future, abolished the past foundations, made and persisted in a radical experiment of communism, replaced middle class parliamentarism by a new form of government and used its first energy of free life to initiate an entirely novel social order. It is acts of faith and audacities of this scale that change or hasten the course of human progress. It does not follow necessarily that what is being attempted now is the desirable or the definite

form of the future society, but is a certain sign that a phase of civilisation is beginning to pass and the Time Spirit preparing a new phase and a new order.

It may well take time for the communistic idea to make its way westward and it may too undergo considerable modifications in the passage, but there is already a remarkable evolution in that sense. The Labour movement is everywhere completing its transformation from a reformist into a socialistic and therefore necessarily, in spite of present hesitations, a revolutionary type. The struggle of Labour for a better social status and a share in the government has grown obsolete: the accepted ideal is now the abolition of the capitalistic structure of society and the substitution of labour for wealth as the social basis and the governing power. The differences within the body of the movement touch no longer the principle but the means and process of the change and precise form to be given to the coming socialistic government and society. It is only this division of counsels that still retards the onward motion and prevents the joining of the decided issue of battle. It is noticeable that the strength of the socialist and communistic idea increases as one goes eastward, diminishes in the opposite direction: the movement of progress is no longer from the west eastwards but from the east towards the occident. The more extreme forces are however daily increasing everywhere and are making themselves felt even in plutocratic America. In any case, whatever retardation of pace there may be, the direction of the stream is already clear and the result hardly doubtful. The existing European system of civilisation at least in its figure of capitalistic industrialism has reached its own monstrous limits, broken itself by its own mass and is condemned to perish. The issue of the future lies between a labour industrialism not very different except in organisation from its predecessor, some greater spirit and form of socialistic or communistic society such as is being attempted in Russia or else the emergence of a new and as yet unforeseen principle.

The upcoming force that opens a certain latitude for this last possibility is the resurgence of Asia. It is difficult to believe that Asia once free to think, act and live for herself will be for long content merely to imitate the past or the present evolution of Europe. The temperament of her peoples is marked off by too deep-seated a difference, the build and movement of their minds is of another character. At present, however, the movement of resurgence in Asia is finding expression more by a preface, an attempt to vindicate her bare right to live for herself, than by any pregnant effort of independent creative thought or action. The Asiatic unrest is still the second prominent feature of the situation. It is manifest in different forms from Egypt to China. It takes the shape in the Moslem world of a rejection of protectorates and mandates and a ferment of formation of indepen-

dent Asiatic states. It manifests in India in a growing dissatisfaction with half methods and a constantly accentuated vehemence of the demand for complete and early self-government. It is creating in the Far East obscurer movements the sense of which has yet to emerge. This unrest envisages as yet little beyond the beginnings of a free action and existence. It appeals to the ideas of liberty that have long been fully self-conscious and the formulas that are systematically applied in Europe, self-government, Home Rule, democracy, national independence. At the same time there is involved, subconscient as yet in the great Asiatic masses but already defining itself in more awakened minds, another issue that may seem at first sight incompatible or at least disparate with this imitative seizing on principles associated with the modern forms of freedom and progress,—an ideal of spiritual and normal independence and the defence against the European invasion of the subtle principle of Asiatic culture. In India the notion of an Asiatic, a spiritualised democracy has begun to be voiced, though it is as yet vague and formless. The Khilafat agitation has a religious and therefore a cultural as well as a political motive and temper. The regime of the mandate is resisted because it signifies the political control and economic exploitation of Asia by Europe, but there is another more latent source of repugnance. The effective exploitation is impossible without the breaking and recasting of Asiatic life into the harsh moulds of European capitalism and industrialism and, although Asia must learn to live no longer in the magnificent but insufficient past but in the future, she must too demand to create that future in her own image. It is this twofold claim carrying in it the necessity of a double, an inner and an outer resistance that is the present meaning of the Asiatic unrest and the destined meaning of the Asiatic resurgence.

The capitalistic governments of Europe embarrassed by Asiatic unrest and resistance attempt to meet it with a concession in form and a denial in fact and prinicple. India is granted not the beginning of responsible government, but a first "substantial" step towards; but it is a step hedged in with a paralysing accumulation of safeguards for British political and capitalistic interests and a significant condition that her farther progress must depend on the extent to which she is prepared to reform herself politically, economically and socially in the image of the British spirit. A French military force occupies Damascus, expels the king and government elected by the people, but promises to establish an indigenous government subservient to the European interest and its mandate. England offers Mesopotamia an Arab government saddled with an Anglo-Indian administration and the moral and material benefits of the exploitation of the oil of the Mosul; meanwhile she is fighting the insurgent population in order to force on it its own greater good against its own barbarous and ignorant will to independence. A British control is to guarantee the integrity of

Persia. Palestine is to be colonised by a Jewish immigration from Europe and to be administered by a High Commissioner in the interests—but against the will—of all its races. The Turkish people stripped of temporal empire and the prestige of the Khalifate are to be free under a strict and close international control and to be compelled by a Greek army to accept this unprecedented happiness and this unequalled opportunity of becoming a civilised modern nation. Here much more than against the organised forces of Labour the old regime has the material power to enforce its dictates. It remains none the less certain that a solution of this kind will not put an end to the unrest of Asia. The attempt is likely to recoil upon itself, for these new burdens must impose a greatly added strain on an already impossible financial condition and hasten the social and economic revolution in Europe. And even if it were otherwise, the resurgence of a great continent cannot be so held under. One day it will surely prevail against whatever difficulties and possess its inevitable future.

These two predestined forces of the future, socialism and the Asiatic resurgence, tend for the moment to form at least a moral alliance. The Labour and socialistic parties in the now dominant nations are strongly opposed to the policy of their governments and extend their support to the claims of subject or menaced nationalities in Asia as well as in Europe. In the more advanced Asiatic countries, as in Ireland, the national movement allies itself closely with a nascent labour movement. Bolshevik Russia is in alliance with or sovietises and controls the policy of the existing independent States of central Asia, casts a ferment into Persia and lends whatever moral support it can to the Turk or the Arab. This tendency may have in itself little meaning beyond the sympathy created by reaction against a common pressure. Forces and interests in action are always opportunist and grasp in emergency at help or convenience from whatever quarter; but these alliances of pure interest, unless they find some more permanent support, are fragile and ephemeral combinations. Bolshevist Russia may set up Soviet governments in Georgia and Azerbaijan, but if these are only governments of occasion, if Sovietism does not correspond to or touch something more profound in the instinct, temperament and idea of these peoples, they are not likely to be durable. British Labour, although it makes no present conditions, expects a self-governing India to evolve in the sense of its own social and economic idea, but it is conceivable that a self-governing India may break away from the now normal line of development and discover her own and unexpected social and economic order. All that we can say certainly at present is that the dominant governments of Europe have so managed that they find their scheme of things in opposition at once to the spirit and menaced by the growth of two great world forces, both compressed and held back by it and both evident possessors of the future.

That means that we are as yet far from a durable order and can therefore look forward to no suspension of the earth's troubles. The balance of the present, if such a chaotic fluctuation of shifts and devices can be called a balance, has no promise of duration, is only a moment of arrest, and we must expect, as soon as the sufficient momentum can come or circumstance open a door of escape for the release of compressed forces, more surprising and considerable movements, radical reversals and immense changes. The subject of supreme interest is not the circumstance that will set free their paths, for fate when it is ready takes advantage of any and every circumstance, but the direction they will take and the meaning they will envelop. The evolution of a socialistic society and the resurgence of Asia must effect great changes and yet they may not realise the larger human hope. Socialism may bring in a greater equality and a closer association into human life, but if it is only a material change, it may miss other needed things and even aggravate the mechanical burden of humanity and crush more heavily towards the earth its spirit. The resurgence of Asia, if it means only a redressing or shifting of the international balance, will be a step in the old circle, not an element of the renovation, not a condition of the step forward and out of the groove that is now felt however vaguely to be the one thing needful. The present international policy of Labour carries in itself indeed at its end,—provided Labour in power is faithful to the mind of Labour in opposition,—one considerable promise, a juster equation between the national and the international idea, an international comity of free nations, a free, equal and democratic league of peoples in place of the present close oligarchy of powers that only carries the shadow of an unreal League as its appendage. An international equality and cooperation in place of the past disorder or barbaric order of domination and exploitation is indeed a first image that we have formed of the better future. But that is not all: it is only a framework. It may be at lowest a novel machinery of international convenience, it may be at most a better articulated body for the human race. The spirit, the power, the idea and will that are meant to inform or use it is the greater question, the face and direction of destiny that will be decisive.

The two forces that are arising to possess the future represent two great things, the intellectual idealism of Europe and the soul of Asia. The mind of Europe laboured by Hellenism and Christianity and enlarging its horizons by free thought and science has arrived at an idea of human perfectibility or progress expressed in the terms of an intellectual, material and vital freedom, equality and unity of close association, an active fraternity or comradeship in thought and feeling and labour. The difficulty is to make of the component parts of this idea a combined and real reality in practice and the effort of European progress has been a labour to discover and set

up a social machinery that shall automatically turn out this production. The first equation discovered, an individualistic democracy, a system of political liberty and equality before the law, has helped only to a levelling as between the higher orders, the competitive liberty of the strongest and most skilful to arrive, an inhuman social inequality and economic exploitation, an incessant class war and a monstrous and opulently sordid reign of wealth and productive machinery. It is the turn now of another equation, an equality as absolute as can be fabricated amid the inequalities of Nature by reason and social science and machinery,—and most of all an equal association in the labour and the common profits of a collective life. It is not certain that this formula will succeed very much better than its predecessor. This equality can only be presently secured by strict regulation, and that means that liberty at least for a time must go under. And at any rate the root of the whole difficulty is ignored, that nothing can be real in life that is not made real in the spirit. It is only if men can be made free, equal and united in spirit that there can be a secure freedom, equality and brotherhood in their life. The idea and sentiment are not enough, for they are incomplete and combatted by deep-seated nature and instinct and they are besides inconstant and fluctuate. There must be an immense advance that will make freedom, equality and unity our necessary internal and external atmosphere. This can come only by a spiritual change and the intellect of Europe is beginning to see that the spiritual change is at least a necessity; but it is still too intent on rational formula and on mechanical effort to spare much time for discovery and realisation of the things of the spirit.

Asia has made no such great endeavour, no such travail of social effort and progress. Order, a secure ethical and religious framework, a settled economical system, a natural, becoming fatally a conventional and artificial, hierarchy have been her ordinary methods, everywhere indeed where she reached a high development of culture. These things she founded on her religious sense and sweetened and made tolerable by a strong communal feeling, a living humanity and sympathy and certain accesses to a human equality and closeness. Her supreme effort was to discover not an external but a spiritual and inner freedom and that carried with it a great realisation of spirituality, equality and oneness. This spiritual travail was not universalised nor any endeavour made to shape the whole of human life in its image. The result was a disparateness between the highest inner individual and the outward social life, in India the increasing ascetic exodus of the best who lived in the spirit out of the secure but too narrow walls of the ordinary existence and the sterilising idea that the greatest universal truth of spirit discovered by life could yet not be the spirit of that life and is only realisable outside it. But now Asia enduring the powerful pressure of Europe is being forced to face the life problem again under the necessity of another

and a more active solution. Assimilative, she may reproduce or imitate the occidental experiment of industrialism, its first phase of capitalism, its second phase of socialism; but then her resurgence will bring no new meaning or possiblity into the human endeavour. Or the closer meeting of these two halves of the mind of humanity may set up a more powerful connection between the two poles of our being and realise some sufficient equation of the highest ideals of each, the inner and the outer freedom, the inner and the outer equality, the inner and the outer unity. That is the largest hope that can be formed on present data and circumstance for the human future.

But also, as from the mixing of various elements an unforeseen form emerges, so there may be a greater unknown something concealed and in preparation, not yet formulated in the experimental laboratory of Time, not yet disclosed in the design of Nature. And that then, some greater unexpected birth from the stress of the evolution may be the justifying result of which this unquiet age of gigantic ferment, chaos of ideas and inventions, clash of enormous forces, creation and catastrophe and dissolution is actually amid the formidable agony and tension of this great imperfect body and soul of mankind in creative labour.

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